

CLASSICAL RECORDS OF THE YEAR

The Sunday Times music critics select the outstanding releases of 1989

A stringent and sustained electro-acoustical experience is to be had from Iannis Xenakis's magnum opus *Kraanerg* (70 minutes long), as recorded on *Etcetera* (£11) by the Alpha Centauri Ensemble under Roger Woodward (the booklet includes an essay on Xenakis by Milan Kundera).

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XENAKIS. *Kraanerg.* Alpha Centauri Ensemble / Roger Woodward. *Etcetera*/Harmonia Mundi © ① KTC1075 (71 minutes: DDD).

Kraanerg—the title itself sounds harsh. It combines Greek words for "accomplishment" and "active energy", and the score, dating from 1968, features both live and taped music. The recording stems from Australian performances of the music as accompaniment to a ballet, but the booklet tells us nothing more about this, and even if the ballet scenario is irrelevant to the music itself as heard on disc, a guide to the work's sections or stages—with some separate tracks—would have been welcome. As it is, you plunge in, hang on, and emerge at the end baffled or bowled over but not, I can safely predict, indifferent.

The music has 'active energy' in abundance. It is often harsh, especially in the way woodwind and brass bend their pitches and slide around and between them. The music is far from inexpressive: in particular, the instrumental sounds on tape, which steer well clear of 'concrete' effects, unfold with the breadth and concentration of an implacable atonal Bruckner, the lower registers emphasized and underpinned by seismic rumblings of percussion. In the latter stage of the work the slowly surging waves of taped material, always in contrast to the more mercurial live sound, build to a towering peak, like a force of nature. Yet, to adapt one of the arguments of Milan Kundera presented in the booklet, this music is more concerned with atmosphere than character; with auras rather than individuals. For all its explicit connection with the very human social and political upheavals of 1968 it is post-humanist music, visionary but cold.

My only minor reservation about the recording (which responds well to a higher than normal volume setting) is that the acoustic for the live players is very dry—no doubt to ensure maximum differentiation from the tape. The performance is dazzling, and I come firmly into the 'bowled over' rather than 'baffled' category. Even so, I was left on the outside.

A.W.

XENAKIS. His newly recorded *Kraanerg*, though, is not a recent work: it dates from 1968, and owes its resurrection to a sequence of danced performances at the Sydney Opera House last year. Clearly those performances had an effect on the players: the pianist Roger Woodward writes with fervent partisanship of "the

elemental grandeur of this magnum opus". But it sounds a little different from outside. Part of the problem may be that the dialogue of orchestra and tape, which would generate commitment and edge in the instrumentalists, is necessarily blurred for the listener to a record: one hears only a lot of low rumblings, brassy outbursts and electronic bellowings that seem to take us no further than *Eonta* and *Bohor*, only over a longer timespan.

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